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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: POLLING PEACEFUL; TIGER INTIMIDATION
KEEPS NUMBERS DOWN IN NORTH AND EAST

REF: COLOMBO 1965

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) As of mid-day on November 17, voting in the presidential election was proceeding peacefully in the central and southern parts of the country. Virtually no voters had crossed from territory controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north and east to cast their ballots, however, and turn-out among voters in Government-controlled areas bordering Tiger territory was reportedly sparse as well. In the turbulent eastern district of Batticaloa suspected LTTE cadres had thrown grenades at empty polling stations the night of November 16, but no injuries were reported. Secretary of Public Security, Law and Order Tilak Ranaviraja told the Ambassador after polls closed at 4:00 p.m. local time that there would be no curfew tonight. The low-to-no turnout reported among Tamil voters in the north and east is expected will hurt severely the prospects of opposition United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe. End summary.

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN, CENTRAL AND
SOUTHERN FRONTS

2. (SBU) On November 17, informal Embassy election monitoring teams deployed in various districts in western, central and southern regions of the country reported that polling in the presidential election appeared to be proceeding in a largely peaceful manner. Embassy teams reported no evidence of illegal campaigning/canvassing in the vicinity of polling stations in these areas, although one team in the southeastern district of Moneragala was told by police of reports that some upcountry or "hill" Tamil voters had been assaulted by pro-Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) "thugs." In the central district of Matale, on the other hand, long lines of voters, some of them with small children in tow, began queuing early in the morning to cast their ballot. Turnout was also reportedly strong in Colombo and its environs. Local election monitors at some polling stations in the north-central district of Anuradhapura reported almost an 80 percent turnout rate, while our Embassy team in the southern district of Galle reported a 75 percent turnout rate. A seasoned political organizer in the battleground southwestern district of Kalutara, where voting lines were similarly long, told our team there that this election was the most closely contested race he had participated in in nearly two decades. We have received no reports of a curfew being imposed, Secretary of Public Security, Law and Order Tilak Ranaviraja told the Ambassador after polls closed at 4:00 p.m. local time that there would be no curfew tonight.

NO-SHOWS IN THE NORTH

3. (SBU) As feared (Reftel), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-sponsored day of mourning reduced turnout among voters in LTTE-controlled areas to a mere dribble, and depressed voting levels among Tamils in government-controlled territory bordering these areas as well. After the polls had been open for two hours at the checkpoint at Omanthai in the northern district of Vavuniya, not a single person had crossed over to vote, International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) personnel who staff the "no-man's land" between the two territories told our Embassy monitoring team (7,000-10,000 individuals make the crossing for various purposes on an average day). Our team reported that approximately 20 buses provided by the government to ferry voters to cluster polling stations were sitting idle, while scores of election officials and monitors were milling about, waiting for something to do. When our team returned to the checkpoint at 2:00 p.m. local time, local poll monitors reported that only 50 out of 128,000 registered voters had showed up, most of whom are believed to have previously resettled on the government-controlled side. At a polling

station midway between Mannar and Vavuniya no one from LTTE-controlled territory had crossed over to vote as of about 11:00 a.m., according to local poll monitors, but they had heard of a bus with six voters crossing over to another polling station elsewhere in Mannar. Turnout in government-controlled territory in Mannar was also reportedly light, with reports of voters complaining of difficulty in obtaining transportation to the polling stations.

14. (SBU) Voters were similarly scarce in the northern district of Jaffna. At one polling station visited by our Embassy team there, a total of 10 voters had turned up as of noon. Across the street from another polling station, our team observed a sign in Tamil exhorting the local population not to "compromise Eelam" by voting. Local businesses in Jaffna town were largely shuttered on election day, in observance of the day of "mourning." (In contrast, most businesses in Mannar town were open, although vehicular traffic was reportedly light.) Local police told our team in Jaffna of reports of LTTE cadres visiting voters door-to-door the previous evening, warning them not to vote. Local election monitors complained that suspected LTTE cadres were conducting surveillance of polling stations to intimidate voters. If so, their campaign to discourage voting seemed to be working. The head EU monitor in Jaffna estimated voter turnout in the district at 6 percent--including from the government-controlled areas. The Government Agent put it even lower--at a mere 1.5 percent.

IN THE EAST, MUSLIMS VOTE;
TAMILS GIVE IT A MISS

15. (SBU) The perennially turbulent eastern district of Batticaloa saw several empty polling stations attacked by grenades by suspected LTTE the night before elections. Violence on the day of the election itself, however, was limited (at least for Batticaloa); one bomb blast occurred mid-morning at a vote counting center in Batticaloa town, injuring one policeman. Turnout among Muslim voters was good, although there were reports of fisticuffs between supporters of rival politicians in at least one location, but turnout among Tamil voters was reportedly only about 2 percent at mid-day, according to Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police Rohan Abeywardena, and there were no reports of voters crossing over from the LTTE-controlled area. Our Embassy team in the ethnically diverse eastern district of Trincomalee reported that turnout there was higher, including among Tamil voters, with the overall rate estimated at about 60 percent by mid-day.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) We do not expect a winner to be announced until about mid-day November 18 (assuming the Election Commissioner does not call for re-polling in any area), and the outcome of voting in the south and central region, according to everyone we have talked to, remains too close to call. (Note: According to constitutional lawyer Rohan Edirisinghe, the apparent LTTE interference in certain areas in the north and the east will not be enough for the Election Commissioner to declare the polls invalid since his mandate does not cover Tiger activities. End note.) Apart from the LTTE-mandated boycott in the north and east, the comparative lack of reports we have received so far of electoral violence/fraud/intimidation/tampering could make this one of freest and fairest elections seen in Sri Lanka in a long time. As noted reftel, however, the low-to-no turnout from LTTE-controlled territories will benefit Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate Mahinda Rajapakse and severely hurt the prospects of Ranil Wickremesinghe, the pro-peace process opposition United National Party (UNP) candidate. A source in Rajapakse's campaign contacted poloff just before polls closed to report the SLFP'ers were feeling very "confident"; a UNP MP the Ambassador had talked with a few hours before sounded more restrained--but not disconsolate.
LUNSTEAD